



ECHOES OF TRADITION: FOLKLORE IN MAMANG DAI'S 'THE LEGENDS OF PENSAM

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ABSTRACT

The North-east region is full of picturesque landscape depicting the rich culture and indigenous folklore. The region has created literature which embraces the beauty and rich literary tradition. North-east Indian literature is an amalgamation of unique culture and traditions of the eight states namely- Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Tripura, Mizoram, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim. Mamang Dai's *Legends of Pensam* is a rich tapestry of narratives that intertwine folkloristic elements with contemporary storytelling. This research article delves into the folkloristic traditions embedded within Dai's work, examining how these traditions contribute to the narrative structure, thematic depth, and cultural resonance of the text. Through a close analysis of key folkloristic motifs, narrative techniques, and thematic explorations, this article aims to elucidate the ways in which Dai employs folklore to construct a vibrant literary world that resonates with readers.

KEYWORDS: North-East Literature, Rich Culture, Tradition, Folk Lore, Narrative Structure, Thematic Explorations, Vibrant Literary World

INTRODUCTION

Folk literature, though emerging in academia, deeply intersects with cultural studies, humanities, history, psychology, languages, and theology. In Indian folkloristic tradition, it is integral and indivisible. Academic perspectives like religious, cultural, psychological, socio-psychological, and historical have bolstered its study throughout the twentieth century. Recognized as a democratic tradition, it embodies grassroots creativity, continuity, and the transmission of rich traditions across generations. Narratives are quite ubiquitous and pluralistic in nature. Narratives are believed to be intrinsic to human culture, spanning fiction, film, myths, rituals, and beliefs. They serve as diverse forms through which humans interpret and understand the world, rooted in our ancient imagination. Folklore offers a fascinating window into diverse socio-cultural traditions, revealing insights into societal beliefs and psychological dynamics through popular myths. In this regard, David Herman exemplifies that "Stories are cognitive as well as textual in nature, structures of mind as well as constellations of verbal, cinematic, pictorial, or other signs produced and interpreted within particular communicative settings"(8). Hence these stories, imbued with mysticism, profoundly influence collective consciousness, shaping views on gender, community bonds, and cultural identity. These stories happen to be an integral part of folk literature that is celebrated through all these years. The field of folklore explores a wide array of topics including origins, folksongs, folk drama, and mythologies and remains indispensable for understanding human existence across social sciences today. North East region is built of many aboriginal tribes that demonstrates the rich folkloristic tradition. This Folkloristic tradition is being passed as an oral narrative from one generation to another through all these years. The writers of this region have preserved this art

of oral narratives to reiterate by making it more relevant and acclaimed in the contemporary world. The writers preserve this ancient heritage as a repository which can be passed through generations making it more significant. Mamang Dai, an accomplished Indian author, draws upon her cultural heritage in *Legends of Pensam*, a collection of tales that transports readers into the heart of Arunachal Pradesh. This region, nestled in the northeastern corner of India, is renowned for its rich tapestry of oral traditions and folklore. Dai's narrative skilfully weaves together these traditional elements with contemporary storytelling techniques, offering readers a glimpse into a world where myth and reality converge.

The Saga of Folklore in Arunachal Pradesh:

"The Legends of Pensam," written by Mamang Dai, explores the intricate folkloristic tradition woven by the Adi tribe. Situated in Arunachal Pradesh, renowned as the land of the dawn-lit mountains and Mamang Dai's ancestral homeland, this region is home to twenty-six tribes, each with diverse sub-clans living together in peaceful coexistence. These hill tribes, speaking Tibeto-Burman languages with distinct dialects, exhibit remarkable resilience and endurance in the face of challenging weather conditions in their remote environment. Their culture is deeply rooted in mutual solidarity and shared traditions. The culture of mutual bonding among these tribes is deeply rooted in their ways of life. For this deep-rooted meaning, Mamang Dai mentions in her article *Oral Narratives and Myth* that, "The tribes of Arunachal Pradesh have always lived off the forest without any threat to the ecosystem. The tenets of traditional practice are deep rooted in environment ethics, supporting a close and harmonious relationship with nature" (Glimpses from the North- East 2). Dai articulates about the importance of memory and story-telling tradition prevalent in Arunachal

Pradesh from the prehistoric times.

Folkloristic Motifs and Themes:

In the realm of cultural studies today, insights from one field can significantly enrich our understanding when considered alongside perspectives from related disciplines. This holistic approach allows for broader and more profound insights. Literature serves as a reflection of culture, and folklore is an integral part of this cultural tapestry. Within literature, folklore encompasses a diverse array of elements such as fictional stories about people and animals, songs, jokes, tales, cultural myths, and quotations. These narratives are transmitted verbally or through various forms of written expression, encapsulating the essence of a society's beliefs and traditions.

Mary Ellen B. Lewis aptly articulates this connection: "Both folklore and literature are integral components of culture, created by cultural beings. Their examination deepens our understanding of the creators and inheritors of culture—shedding light on their creative processes, strategies, and the roles their materials play" (MEB. Lewis, 1978: 163). Thus, the study of folklore and literature not only illuminates cultural dynamics but also enhances our appreciation of the human experience across different epochs and societies." *The Legends of Pensam* by Mamang Dai is a novel that intricately weaves together folklore, history, and the contemporary lives of the Adis, a tribal community in Arunachal Pradesh, India. Set against the lush backdrop of the Himalayas, the story follows the life of Abotani, a legendary ancestor of the Adis, and his descendants across generations.

Central to *Legends of Pensam* are various folkloristic motifs that serve as foundational elements of the narratives. These motifs include themes of nature worship, supernatural encounters, heroic deeds, and the interplay between humans and spirits. The author's portrayal of these motifs reflects a deep-rooted respect for cultural traditions while simultaneously exploring universal human experiences.

Dai's use of nature as a backdrop and active participant in the stories mirrors the reverence for the natural world found in many folk traditions. Through vivid descriptions and allegorical storytelling, she imbues natural elements with symbolic meaning, reinforcing the interconnectedness of humans, nature, and the spiritual realm.

Narrative Techniques:

In crafting her narratives, Dai employs a blend of oral storytelling techniques and literary craftsmanship. The prose often adopts a lyrical quality, echoing the rhythmic cadence of oral traditions passed down through generations. This stylistic choice not only enhances the authenticity of the folkloristic elements but also invites readers to engage with the stories on a deeper, emotional level.

Moreover, Dai utilizes framing devices and narrative structures reminiscent of traditional storytelling methods. The use of framing narratives, where stories are nested within larger narratives, allows for multiple layers of meaning to unfold.

This approach not only weaves richer threads into the tapestry of storytelling but also illuminates the timeless allure of folk traditions in contemporary literature.

Folkloristic Approach in the novel, *The Legends of Pensam*:

Nestled in a remote village of Arunachal Pradesh, "The Legends of Pensam" immerses readers in a captivating journey through the myths, legends, beliefs, and customs of the Adi tribe. Guided by the narrator and her companion Mona, owner of "The Diary of the World" magazine, we traverse the Siang Valley, where village elders in Duyang, Yelen, Sirum, Pigo, and Gurдум share age-old oral traditions. These tales, deeply ingrained in the Adi's cultural fabric, collectively define Pensam—a term that evokes both a middle ground and the secret depths of the human heart, where life unfolds in its myriad forms, resilient against both tranquil and tempestuous times (Vii).

Critics, like GSP Rao, view Pensam as more than folklore; it serves as a bridge that merges myth with reality in Adi life, navigating their journey from tradition to modernity.

For the Adi, identifying with Pensam is instinctive, intertwined with the profound significance of who tells these stories. At the heart of their cultural preservation stands the miri, the tribal priest, celebrated by Mamang Dai in her essay "Understanding Tribal Religions." The miri's chants and rituals breathe life into Adi myths, shaping their worldview and responses to life's trials (88).

Central to these narratives is the Adi creation myth, emerging from Keyum's primordial stillness—a genesis story unique to their cosmogony, untouched by Hindu influences like Brahma or Prajapati (56).

The Adi's beliefs in spirits—benign and malevolent—are pivotal, reflected in tales such as that of Birbik, the water serpent, whose apparition foreshadows tragic events etched in the community's memory. Shamans, as conduits between realms, perform rites to appease spirits and safeguard their people from harm.

Despite modern influences from missionaries and post-Independence governments, the Adi cling steadfastly to their ancestral myths. These stories, passed down through generations via oral tradition, not only explain natural phenomena but also impart moral guidelines and spiritual solace, anchoring individuals amidst the whirlwind of change.

In "The Legends of Pensam," Mamang Dai eloquently explores how these oral traditions shape Adi identity, foster community solidarity, and offer profound insights into the human experience amid the serene landscapes of Arunachal Pradesh.

Cultural Resonance and Contemporary Relevance:

Legends of Pensam resonates with contemporary readers by exploring timeless themes such as identity, belonging, and the preservation of cultural heritage. Through the lens of folkloristic traditions, Dai addresses pressing issues facing indigenous communities, including environmental stewardship

and cultural preservation in the face of modernization.

By weaving together the past and present, Dai's work invites readers to reflect on the significance of folklore in shaping cultural identity and fostering a sense of community. Her narratives serve as a bridge between generations, preserving oral traditions while adapting them to resonate with contemporary sensibilities.

CONCLUSION

Mamang Dai's *Legends of Pensam* exemplifies the enduring power of folkloristic traditions in contemporary literature. Through the seamless integration of folk motifs, narrative techniques, and thematic explorations, Dai creates a literary landscape that captivates readers and enriches their understanding of cultural heritage. By embracing folklore as a narrative resource, Dai not only preserves indigenous traditions but also ensures their relevance in an increasingly globalized world. Mamang Dai's approach to narrating tribal stories through a novel represents a notable innovation. In an era where contemporary society often seeks rational explanations for every occurrence, myths and legends evoke a different response—a call to embrace faith. These narratives, steeped in myths, legends, beliefs, and rituals, reside deep within the collective unconscious of communities, serving to unify them in their daily lives. Through the act of novel writing, Dai effectively revitalizes ancient tales and customs, preserving and sharing the cultural heritage of her tribe.

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